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THE UNLIVED LIFE IS WORTH EXAMINING:
NOTHINGS AND NOBODIES BEHIND THE SCENES

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how people talk about the things that have not happened in their lives. I argue that we can perform reverse biographical identity work upon our unmade selves by exploring the meanings of unlived, non-experience. Challenging one's own rehearsed life story is an act of narrative self-transgression, involving negative responsibility assumption. Drawing on my symbolic interactionist theory of "nothing," I consider how negative social phenomena (no-things, no-bodies and non-events) are interactively accomplished and retrospectively made sense of in personal accounts. Themes of lost opportunities, silence, invisibility, and emptiness emerge from an analysis of 27 stories. These tales reveal a mixture of emotions: not only sadness, stigma, shame and regret, but also relief, pride, acceptance, and gratitude. Narratives of nothing are often ambivalent in form, reflecting the complexity of storied life behind the scenes.

Keywords: nothing, self, identity, biography, narrative, emotion

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THE OTHER SIDE OF IDENTITY

A common preoccupation is the idea of an alternate and better self. We contemplate our lives in terms of choices and decisions that have made us who we are but which we could have resolved differently. How might things have turned out if we had taken that job, gone on that date, moved to that place, or said those words? Who might we have become if we had pursued an opportunity: accepted not declined it, answered yes instead of no? Imagining these untrodden paths, we indulge in counterfactual thinking, tormenting ourselves with questions of “What if...?” This often evokes negative and temporally arced emotions, such as shame, nostalgic wistfulness, resentment, and regret. Existential guilt accompanies the fear that we have not made the most of our selves, leaving our best experiences unlived (Rank 1936). It feels like a betrayal of the self to waste and squander opportunity: to spoil one’s own identity by not realising its potential. We cannot help but compare the life we have with all the others that we lack, feeling the necessary limitations of our single, mortal being.

The “road not taken” (Frost 1916) is a popular cultural motif, explored in poems, films, and novels. It resonates with this human tendency towards ambivalence and dualistic thinking, while fueling the flames of self-chastisement. The grass always seems greener on the other side, and we feel haunted by the perfect, ideal image of the options we turned down. These symbolic forms appear like the blemish marks of stigma, spoiling self-identity with their indications of a better life elsewhere (Goffman 1963a). Comparing our virtual and actual selves (ibid.), we feel excluded from what might have been and how we might have

lived. If only we could take all paths, try out each different option; only then we could be sure that we had made the best decision. Instead we must accept the finitude of positively chosen actions, focusing on the things we do, that really happen, and ignoring those that don't.

This self-reflexive work, which most of us perform, remains quite superficial. It is easy to indulge a fantasy or daydream about what could have been. There is a certain satisfaction to be found in imagining a perfect and idyllic scene, poignantly heightened by our own exclusion from it. Juxtaposing made and unmade selves, we represent life's crossroads as a set of simple contrasts between good and bad, right and wrong, joy and sadness. Berating ourselves for making what now seem obvious mistakes, we spin arbitrary decisions into great romantic tragedies. Wistfully, we regale our friends with stories of "the one that got away," sharing in the laughter of regretful recognition.

However, what would happen if took this thought experiment more seriously? If we really examined what we have not known, could we learn more about ourselves? Turning over the mirror to study the other side, we might find deeper and insightful meanings in the realm of non-experience. This paper makes an argument for narrative transgression through negative responsibility assumption. By this, I mean the act of challenging one's own rehearsed life story through careful reappraisal, focusing particularly on the way we view the things we have not done. Biographical identity work can be performed not only on the extant self of conscious lived experience, but also on the myriad of lost, forgotten, unreal selves that never came to be. Inverting Socrates' assertion that "the unexamined life is not worth living," I argue that beyond the storied looking glass, the un-lived life unfolds in parallel, deserving close attention.

This informs theoretical debates about identity and selfhood. Late modern anxiety may explain some people's feelings of disappointment, as a lay, first order construct (Schütz

1972) indexing shame, guilt, regret, and sadness. However, this limits us to common sense assumptions about the idea of ‘nothing’ as a judgment of negative subjective value. Existential-humanistic approaches encourage us to conceptualize nothingness more widely, recognizing positive alongside negative associations and emotional ambivalence. Tales of lost experience might then be told differently, revealing more uplifting themes of pride, relief, gratitude, and contented satisfaction. Narrators may also shift their footing over time, changing their perspective or moving back and forth. This suggests a second order, theoretical construction of the term “disappointment”: the acceptance and integration of complex, mixed emotions within one’s inner world (Craib 1994). Regret and remorse can be rendered biographically meaningful and reparatively worked on through the therapeutic process (Dryden 2007; Morgan 2001,). Below, I show how my participants varied in the extent to which they “successfully” reached this disappointed state of self-reconciliation. Their narratives of nothing indicate the diverse ways in which actors can frame negative experience and use it to perform reverse biographical identity work.

A CALL TO NEGATIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Studying the reverse side of subjective experience is not only a personal matter but also a social and ethical “going concern” (Hughes 1971). This reminds us of the intertwined relationship between mind, self, and society (Mead 1934). The politically transgressive role of micro-sociology has long been argued, from Mills’ (1959) call to relate private troubles to public issues, through Becker’s (1967) sympathetic attention to the disadvantaged underdog, to feminist models of a relational ethics of care (Gilligan 1982; Smart 2007). As Levinas

(1974) argued, suffering need not be “uselessly” self-absorbed, but rather can be a relational act, borne alongside and on behalf of others.

Theorists of social selfhood have argued that late modern western culture, characterized by trends of detraditionalisation, individuation, and hyper-reflexivity, has made us anxiously preoccupied with questions of self-identity (Bauman 2007; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991). The once stable, unified, integral self is now fragmented, multiphrenic, lonely, and incomplete (Calhoun 1994; Gergen 1991; Elliott 2007; Hall 1996; Riesman 1961; Taylor 1989). Faced with an overwhelming range of possibilities and endless potential, identity descends into a crisis of self-doubt, instability, and narrative uncertainty (Baumeister 1987; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Polkinghorne 1988). This might explain why some people — the relatively affluent and educated middle classes — may have well-rehearsed, articulate accounts of dissatisfaction and first order disappointment. Growing numbers of clients seeking psychotherapy are consumed with regret, blaming themselves for failing to grasp opportunities and wishing they had been braver (Sarner 2019). Remorse like this can spiral, building fatalistic personal myths about whole lifetimes of non-doing (Dryden 2007; Morgan 2001; cf. McAdams 1993). However, perhaps these voices only represent a certain demographic: therapy culture’s “worried well” who suffer “influenza” (Furedi 2003; James 2007). Could there be other ways of socially experiencing nothing, perhaps subtler and less consciously composed, that tell us something interesting and different about second order disappointment? To reach this broader understanding, we need to draw on other social theories with a universal scope.

Existentialist philosophers argued that, given the absurd arbitrariness of human being, “thrown” into the world (Heidegger [1927] 1996; Sartre 1943), it is up to each individual to find meaning and create value through the cultivation of the will (Nietzsche [1882] 2018; Schopenhauer [1819] 2014;). With this total freedom comes a burden of responsibility, to

shed the safety and comforts of conventionality and live according to one's own personal truth (Sartre 1943). It takes courage to confront the anxiety, fear, and dread that this evokes (Kierkegaard [1843] 2005, [1849] 1989; Tillich [1952] 2014), and so we hide behind convenient "bad faith" narratives of circumstance and fatalism (Sartre 1943). The road not taken disappears when its existence is denied.

Existential and critical humanistic sociologists argue that the same logic applies to the social world (Douglas and Johnson 1977; Plummer 2000, 2019). Vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940) and justificatory accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) provide reasonable explanations for the choices and actions that people positively make and take. For example, the "relationship escalator" is a default cultural script that validates conventional decisions to date, marry, cohabit, and have children (Gahran 2017). When template forms are on the shelf, we enjoy their neat convenience; there is no need to adapt or embellish them with individual meaning (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). Yet these social narratives of doing are interactively negotiated and embedded in relationships of power. A critically informed humanism urges us to bear collective responsibility for this and invite different stories (Jackson 2002; Plummer 2019).

I want to argue that this call to responsibility can be extended from the positive to the negative realms of (un)lived experience. We can find meaning and value not only in the things that we have done, had or become, but also in those that we have not. Lost and missing versions of ourselves appear as symbolic figures, alongside haunting others. Narrative transgression helps us to make sense of these no-things and no-bodies, folding them in to our life stories. Sometimes this means tales of first order disappointment and dissatisfaction; other times we can delve deeper and reach second order positions of wisdom and resolution. This is not to imply that we "choose" our negative life experiences (although sometimes we do), but rather that we can reflect upon and understand them as constitutive aspects of

identity. Imagined, undone selves can be incorporated into their real, actualized counterparts, to build more balanced, holistic selves.

As we shall see from the data, this means that narratives of nothing can take varied forms. While some stories are pessimistically imbued with themes of shame, regret, and sadness, others take a more triumphant tone of pride, relief, and gratitude. Some people's non-selves remain lost, broken, or alien, while others hold the promise of dignity, peace, and reconnection. Before presenting these findings, however, let us think more about the subject they concern.

NOTHING TO DO WITH SOCIOLOGY?

I contextualize this argument within my broader project to develop a “sociology of nothing” (Scott 2018, 2019). This is a response to Brekhus's (1998) call to study the “unmarked”: social phenomena that tend to be overlooked in the rush to investigate the deviant, extreme, exotic, and unusual. Marked events have disproportionately greater semiotic weight than unmarked ones, which are empirically more common (Zerubavel 2018). Thus, sociology has traditionally been concerned with “things”: marked, positive phenomena that have tangible effects on lived experience (Durkheim [1895] 2013). However, this focus on “things” has meant the neglect of “no-things”, the larger set of negative phenomena that lie behind the mirror.

The epistemological blindspots (Friedman 2015) this creates have been only partially examined. Although the sociology of everyday life considers the mundane, ordinary, and taken-for-granted (Garfinkel 1967; Moran 2005; Scott 2009a) and science and technology studies (STS) examines how some research remains undone through strategic ignorance

(Frickel 2014; McGoe 2014), these domains still focus largely on positive existents: “somethings” that are there but that people just don’t see. Ritzer (2007) similarly defines “nullities” as things that are tangibly real but lack substance or character, such as soulless shopping malls and automated cashpoints.

Stretching this idea further, the sociology of nothing studies negative non-existents: social phenomena that are not presently manifest and may never come to be. Despite their ostensible absence, these negative phenomena (no-things, no-bodies, non-events, and no-where places) are significantly meaningful symbolic forms that influence the social process. They form an expansive backdrop to our conscious lived experience, haunting and overshadowing all that we do with the imagined possibility of being otherwise. Nothing therefore has a social life — an ontological status and a traceable trajectory. It is produced by and productive of relational identities, in a dynamic, negotiated process.

Phenomenology helps to explain how some things do *not* appear to conscious self-awareness. As ordinary people, we use the “pragmatic attitude” (Sartre [1936] 2001) to perceive the world in terms of objects that hold relevance because we interact with them (Dilthey [1907] 1954; Peirce [1903] 1977). Focusing on these objects that shine forth, we bracket out (Husserl [1913] 2012) everything else that does not matter, and which consequently *isn’t* matter. Thus, in the case of biographical selfhood, most of us reflect on all the things we positively do, have, or become, and the events that happened to us. We do not think about everything else we could have done but didn’t, because this would be infinite. Yet within this imaginary realm, those negative phenomena still exist, and can potentially be brought into awareness.

Using the phenomenological attitude rather than the natural attitude (Husserl [1913] 2012) means studying how things (do not) appear rather than what they are (or are not). This is not a purely intellectual exercise. Lay actors can practice the technique by critically

reflecting on their life stories and challenging their own versions of events. As Heidegger ([1927] 1996) argued, by shifting the aim of our gaze, we start to pay attention to objects recessed in the background, which can be “unconcealed.” Through the process of presentification, we can “make present” symbolic objects that are unreal or imaginary (Husserl [1913] 2012). Thus, we can invoke an ideal image of a thing we never did, experience we lack, or self we never became. These negative phenomena then manifest themselves, appearing subjectively real. We apprehend and orient ourselves towards these objects with intentionality (Husserl [1913] 2012), imbuing them with significance and meaning.

Nothing is a form of social action, in the Weberian sense of being subjectively meaningful, oriented towards other people, and taking their views into account (Scott 2018; cf. Weber [1922] 1947). Reflexive social actors “do” nothing by indicating negative symbolic objects to themselves, designing intentions, and responding to the meanings they call out (Mead 1934). These meanings are further communicated through a conversation of symbolic gestures (Blumer 1969) and negotiated through interaction. For example, if a person decides not to do something that is normatively conventional (take a job, get married, have children, eat regular meals, observe day and night–time hours), they will be aware of the societal reactions that this may evoke, such as stigma and disapproval. These cultural attitudes, imported from society into the self (Mead 1934), shape the meaning that the action has for the individual and their experience of (not) doing it. Significant others also figure as guardians and gatekeepers, denying access to a role, rejecting an identity claim, or limiting the ways in which the self can be performed. For example, when announcing oneself as transgender carries the risk of invalidating misplacement (Stone 1962), actors may decide not to come out and display that public version of themselves.

There are two main ways in which nothing is socially accomplished (Scott 2018, 2019). *Acts of commission* (“doing nothing”) involve deliberately choosing not to do, have, or be something specific. This typically involves motives of avoidance, rejection, dismissal, disengagement, refusal, and resistance. Some-thing is imagined but apprehended as undesirable, and so the actor seeks to negate it. For example, we may decide not to vote, to go on strike, turn down a date, or refuse medical treatment. Acts of commission are usually performed by the self, but they may also be imposed by others or external circumstances. In the latter case, someone else may forcibly remove something from a person, or prevent them from taking up a subject position.

Acts of omission (“non-doing”) occur when a person ends up in a position of being or doing without, by passive default rather than consciously intentionality. It is not that they decide not to do one thing, but rather they are drawn more towards another. The original object lacks pragmatic relevance, does not draw the actor’s attention, and so fades out of awareness. For example, without positive motivation, one may not develop a religious faith, become a political activist or pursue a different career. A woman may be without children not because she actively rejects the prospect of motherhood, but because she prioritizes other things; without her really meaning to, it simply does not happen. Omissive negative symbolic objects are more nebulous and abstract, fuzzily defined. Rather than a specific figure emerging into consciousness, there is a space in which nothing happens. Instead of something not existing, there isn’t anything at all.

METHODOLOGY

To illustrate these arguments, I present data from a small scale, qualitative study that I conducted online over a period of eighteen months between 2017–2018. I set up a project website called *Narratives of Nothing* to gather personal stories of non-being, non-having, and non-doing. This was an attempt, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, to interpretively understand the subjective meanings of experiencing nothing. Participants were invited to submit their written stories either publicly, via the website, or privately, by email to me. I received five of the former and 22 of the latter, making 27 stories in total. These varied in length from one line to several pages, but the majority were 1–2 paragraphs of around 300 words.

The project was approved by my institution’s ethical review board. The key ethical issues to consider were anonymity and confidentiality, sensitivity of subject matter, and informed consent. The latter posed a challenge insofar as I wanted to be as unobtrusive and non-directive as possible. For example, I kept instructions to a minimum and phrased questions in an open-ended style. In an information page, I introduced myself and the broad aims of the project before inviting interested visitors to participate by contributing their written stories. I provided a deliberately loose brief to invite as wide and diverse a range of responses as possible: “Please tell me about something in your life that you have not done, that hasn’t happened, or that you do not have. It can be anything from a small detail to a major life event, as long as it feels important to you.” To prompt participants, I provided a list of suggested topics (decisions not to do or become something, lost opportunities, missed people and objects, wished for attributes, impossible futures, unspoken truths, fateful dodges) and a loose structure of three aspects (telling the story, identifying key people or social influences, and reflecting on how it had affected life since), but explained that these possibilities were not exhaustive. I advised that the accounts could be written in any style,

and indeed, two participants sent poems, although the majority wrote narratives in conventional prose.

All names that appear in the discussion below have been changed to protect the participants' anonymity, unless they explicitly requested otherwise. The ages of participants are shown where this information was given, and omitted where it was not. Some people chose their own pseudonyms, changed personal details or declined to provide demographic information, so it is difficult to describe the sample with complete accuracy, but there did seem to be a predominance of white, middle class, well-educated women. In presenting these data, therefore, I do not claim that they are representative of any general population trends. Instead, I use a selection of interesting cases to explore and exemplify some theoretical ideas.

This raises some important questions of sample bias and data reliability. It is likely that the people who were intrigued by the advert and responded to my call were those who were already self-reflective and had a story to tell. They may fit the profile of the late modern subject, discussed above, who is anxiously uncertain of their identity and feels first order disappointment. This would explain why the majority of stories I received were framed by negative emotions, such as sadness, shame, guilt, and regret. Although I present some contrasting cases to demonstrate my argument, these upbeat tales were empirically rare. Perhaps the wording of the brief, the very exercise itself, was also likely to evoke sorrowful accounts. Difficult and disturbing events might hold more salience in memory, and people dwell upon them more. The motivation to narrate and make biographical sense is greater for the things we miss and feel bad about than for the things that turned out well.

A final fascinating question, albeit beyond the scope of this paper, is that of what data I did *not* collect — which (and whose) stories were *not* told? There is a risk of methodological tautology in this kind of narrative research, whereby prompting participants directly generates keen and swift results. Maybe everybody, if asked, could come up with a

story that would fit my brief and fulfill my criteria. But would they otherwise have had a narrative ready to hand, and if I had not asked, would they ever have composed one? Those people who did not see my request or feel moved to volunteer might just as likely have had a relevant experience, but their tales remain untold. Nothing narratives may therefore be methodological artifacts of the research process rather than “naturally” occurring data. Similarly, we can imagine a set of stories that are known *about* but not *by* an individual, and which therefore is not articulated by them (e.g., a family secret held about one member, and from whom it is concealed). The material could be narrated from the audience perspective but not that of the principal. These two categories of uncollected data suggest that some negative phenomena exist hypothetically but must forever remain empirically unverified.

FINDING NOTHING

Bracketing these questions for present purposes, I move on to a discussion of the findings — those narratives that *did* appear and the stories that *were* told. The following sections explore four key themes that emerged from the data as dimensions of social nothingness: lost opportunities, silence, invisibility, and emptiness. Each of these concerns a distinct type of negative symbolic social object: respectively, non-identities, unspoken words, no-body figures, and unfilled holes.

Lost opportunities

The most common category of response was tales of lost experience that resulted in a non-identity formation. These participants reflected biographically upon their life course as a long form trajectory, focusing on significant moments at which nothing had conspicuously

happened. They had reached a fork in the road, when an opportunity had presented itself or an option held potential, but for one reason or another, had declined to pursue it. Sometimes the individual was consciously aware of turning down a prospect by deliberate acts of commission, while for others who acted ommissively, the experience was more nebulous and latent, recognized only with the benefit of hindsight. In both cases, the lost experience contributed to a sense of non-identity development. This was often experienced with regret and bore the marks of stigma.

Symbolic interactionism understands identity as an ongoing, progressive journey, which is negotiated through relations with others and remains perpetually unfinished. It is a process of actively *becoming*, rather than passively being, a given social role (Becker 1963). This is modeled by the concept of the career trajectory: a successive sequence of stages that unfold over the life course, leading the actor to become progressively committed to a positive identity (Becker 1952, 1963; Goffman 1961a; Strauss 1959). Movement along this pathway is contingent upon the meanings that the actor gives to the prospective self; these meanings are negotiated with significant others (Blumer 1969), such as peers and authority figures. When narrating transformations of identity, actors may reflect upon a sudden or dramatic change (Athens 1995), turning point or moment of epiphany (Strauss 1959), revelatory awakening (DeGloma 2014), or gradual realization (Ebaugh 1988). Whatever the pattern, a common feature of these stories is that there has been a positive progression to becoming something new.

However, what is the reverse of this, if we flip over the mirror? We can conceptualize a negative parallel process of *unbecoming*, whereby an actor moves further away from, not towards, a potential role-identity. The social relations and encounters they experience dissuade rather than encourage them to pursue a certain path, and may lead them towards another. The meanings that the actor comes to attach to the identity are negative and make it

unappealing — stigma, shame, or role conflict, or simply a lack of interesting relevance.

Negative trajectories may follow a sequence of stages that invert those of becoming — key moments of non-event when nothing positively happened (not finding out, not trying out, not coming out, and so on).

Acts of commission lead to a process of dis-identification, whereby an individual consciously rejects, rebels against, or refuses to be a certain type of some-body. By disavowing an unwanted social role (Davis 1961; Gross and Stone 1964), they define their identities negatively, in terms of what it is that they are not, or refuse to be. The actor seeks from their audience retypification (Hewitt and Stokes 1975): a recognition that they are not a member of the group or category with which they might otherwise be labeled. For example, middle class identities are based upon claims to respectability, which entails performatively doing not-being working class (Skeggs 2004; Tyler 2013).

Dis-identification is therefore a process of “becoming a non-,” which produces a negative symbolic object (cf. Blumer 1969). Out of *some-body I won’t become* emerges a new *no-body I will become*. This may take different forms, including never-identities based on abstinence from temptation (Mullaney 2006) and ex-identities based on disengagement from a role that was previously central (Ebaugh 1988). Paradoxically, however, this attempted avoidance of stigma may lead into that very state, insofar as narrative reflection evokes sanctioning through painful self-chastisement.

An example of this came from my participant Madeleine, who decided not to become a pianist. Against the wishes and expectations of her family, who were all accomplished musicians, Madeleine became increasingly disinterested in this career path and finally rebelled. Missing her piano lesson one day was a defiant act of commission, through which she abandoned a prospective self and made a leap for freedom. This was a symbolic gesture

of resistance, showing agency and individual autonomy. Recalled in narrative, it represented a biographical turning point, or moment of epiphany (Strauss 1959):

After having sat one [piano] exam, I remember feeling completely exhausted and was probably extremely stressed... So the next Saturday I remember my parents were not around and my brother was left in charge of getting me to go to my lesson. I refused. It was my decision and he couldn't force me to go.... so I didn't.

However, Madeleine's refusal was also a social act, which was oriented towards significant others — family members, friends, and the piano teacher — and took their views into account (Weber [1922] 1947). This tempered and modified the meanings that Madeleine could give to her subjective experience. Her tale was one of first order disappointment, expressing negative emotions and unresolved loose ends. Poignantly, she looked back on her decision with regret, as she considered how doing nothing had affected her ongoing relations with others and changed her position within the family. Becoming a non-pianist had betrayed her parents' hopes and expectations and challenged their collective face. Taking the view of the other (Mead 1934), Madeleine imagined that her family suffered a courtesy stigma (Goffman 1963a) through their relational association with her (Hannem 2012). She described feelings of shame as she reflected on the deeper implications of her action: that she might be responsible for weakening the social bonds that held the family together (Scheff and Retzinger 1991), and had excluded herself from it. Thus, several decades later, Madeleine remained haunted by the no-body whom she had not become, the shadow of her social self:

I regret that I couldn't talk to my mother, father, sister and aunt with any authority about the subject they loved so much. It would have been a good thing to have had in

common. I could have made them proud. My main feeling is of regret and shame that I let my parents down. I suppose it's the idea of "hiding one's light under a bushel," wasting one's talents... My parents had high hopes for me and I didn't follow through.

(Madeleine, 50)

Acts of omission lead to a different process of non-identification. This occurs when an actor ends up without a particular identity by default, because it simply did not materialize. They did not deliberately refuse to become some-body, but rather there was not anybody whom they wanted to become. Alternatively, there may have been a hypothetical idea of self, but circumstance foreclosed it and did not permit it to arise. Non-identification therefore manifests as a state of lack or deficiency, but it is not necessarily experienced as such. Indeed, as my study of asexuality revealed (Scott et al. 2016) the actor may not even be aware of their non-identified status until others label it as problematic.

This suggests a trajectory that is less clearly defined than that of dis-identification. Rather than a linear sequence of steps leading away from some-body in particular, there is a messy, laterally dispersed array of points leading in various directions. Actors may "drift" (Matza 1964) between different positions without committing themselves to any one. The process of "non-becoming" does not commit the individual to a given non-identity, but rather opens up the possibility of becoming anyone else.

Rachel told such a tale of non-becoming a mother. Reflecting on her experience of being without children, she explained that this was not the result of a conscious decision-not-to, but rather just the way things had turned out in her life. Whereas some women commissively choose to be "childfree" on feminist grounds, in protest at the cultural ideology of motherhood (Chodorow 1978; Gillespie 2003; McAllister 1998), and others are

involuntarily “childless” through the commissively imposed fate of pregnancy loss (Cacciatore 2010; Letherby 1993), a third group of women report that they feel ambivalent, undecided, or indifferent (Letherby 2015; Letherby and Williams 1999).

Thus, Rachel understood her non-parental status as an unintended consequence of a rather random constellation of factors. It was the default station at which she had ended up because nothing had positively happened to persuade her to take the “mother” route. If circumstances had been different, she might have pursued that line, but as it happened, she had drifted off elsewhere. Consequently, Rachel’s account was not a tale of stigma, and did not concern a loss. She expressed no strong emotions, of shame, relief or pride, because she saw no object of negation — there wasn’t any-body there to feel any-thing about. Instead, she focused on her substitutive action: the life that she had built instead, the some-things she had done. Viewing these experiences relatively, she appreciated their fullness more:

If I had married a man who wanted children, I would have been persuaded. I really was indifferent, not antagonistic. But I didn't... So we are happily childless and have been for the 34 years of our marriage. We have had adventures – emigrating, returning – that would have been materially different if we had had children.

(Rachel, 60)

Rachel’s narrative is therefore one of second-order disappointment. Non-becoming was a process of ambivalent affect, which she appraised and reconciled herself to with realistic thought.

Silent Voices

A second theme to emerge from the stories was that of keeping silence. Participants wrote about the things they had not told others, secrets they had held, and times when there wasn't anything they could imagine to possibly say. Here, it seems that (everyday) life imitates (performance) art. Just as in music, comedy and theatre, where the absence of speech creates dramatic tension (Green 2011), so too in social interaction do we find that silence can speak volumes.

Silence has particular cultural significance in individualistic societies, where talk, verbosity, and volume are the principal means of communication. We learn to articulate ourselves clearly through speech, make polite conversation, and generate the capacity for verbal self-expression. Against this unmarked normative background, introversion, quietness, and reticence stand out as suspiciously deviant (Scott 2007; cf. Cain 2012), a conspicuous and marked breach of "business as usual." Yet actors can account for this as a meaningful social action. My participants explained that they left words unsaid for reasons that made sense within a shared vocabulary of motives (Mills 1940). These ranged from fear, taboo, and ignorance (Zerubavel 2006) to defiant self-protection.

By acts of commission, people decide not to say something specific: they indicate to themselves a negative symbolic object that must be kept concealed. Sometimes this can have political motives of power or resistance — from the engaged, oppositional silences of women who pragmatically comply with tyrannical regimes (Keating 2013), to heterosexual men's use of stony silence to defy their "nagging" wives (Tannen 1993), and the strategic, self-protective withdrawal of psychosis as a defense against the family (Laing 1960). The use of silence as a weapon reminds us how power operates "radically" at the micro-social level (Athens 2007). Civil domination (Katovich 2013) is a subtle imposition of the will to influence another's definition of reality, in order to align it with one's own strategic interests (Grills and Prus 2018; Jenkins 2008;).

Silence can also be employed commissively for cooperative motives of tact and discretion. When speech requires acknowledging an uncomfortable truth, we prefer to turn a deaf ear or button our lip (Zerubavel 2006). Through gestures of protective facework (Goffman 1967), we may pretend to ignore an elephant in the room, avoid sensitive topics of conversation, or use studied non-observance (Goffman 1963b) to maintain the interaction order (Goffman 1983). This may involve tacitly agreeing to uphold a definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas [1928] 1970) that we know to be untrue. In nudist camps, swimming pools and gynecological examinations, actors do not talk about their nakedness, colluding in the fiction that “nothing unusual is happening” (Emerson 1970; Scott 2009b Weinberg 1965). In the courtroom, defense lawyers make a show of not reacting when their clients give self-incriminating testimonies, carefully suppressing vocal exclamations and muting facial grimaces (Flower 2016).

In the family, deceptive silences help to keep the peace. Morrow (2013) showed how young women told lies about their parents’ social backgrounds and criminal pasts so as to avoid courtesy stigma. Smart (2009, 2011) revealed how secrets operate within relational networks, as family members colluded on not talking about episodes of infidelity, shameful illnesses, and parental uncertainty. This reminds us of Goffman’s (1959:108) remarks on “the sweet guilt of conspirators” within dramaturgical teams. However, these collusive silences can have unintended consequences for individual actors. Discovering a family secret, especially one that concerns oneself, can have dramatically disruptive effects on personal identity (DeGloma 2014). This is illustrated by my participant Margot, whose family’s refusal to discuss her ethnic heritage left her feeling as if half of her self was missing. Margot’s tale was one of first order disappointment, expressing dissatisfaction with her lack of biographical clarity:

Like any inquisitive child, I wanted to know about my parents' families. My Mum, coming from a big family, could provide detailed accounts of her family and its wide array of members. My Dad however, has quite the opposite story. His mother was adopted, and died before I was born. We know nothing of her birth parents and very little of her adopted ones. His father left before he was born, and all he has ever known of him is that he is a Moroccan man - he never wished to know anything more. I feel as though half of my identity through my heritage is missing. I am aware that I have family members from an entirely different culture to the one I am accustomed, and even though biologically it is a part of me, I will never have the chance to truly get to know it.

(Margot, 20)

Silent acts of omission work quite differently. Rather than something being left unsaid, there is not anything to talk about. Nothing appears on the horizon of possibility (Husserl [1913] 2012) as an object of attention, and without the positive draw towards something, the default line is non-response. This can occur with shyness, when self-consciously inhibited anxiety makes the mind go blank: the shy actor is at a loss as to what to say that will not sound ignorant, embarrassing, or incompetent to the imagined other (Scott 2007). Silence can also be imposed hierarchically upon those in marginalized positions: denying groups a voice means that their voices are not listened to and their testimonies go unheard. Narrative power is lost when one is not able to bear witness to one's own experience (Plummer 2019). This can occur at the macro level of historical and political discourses (Bhambra 2014) but also at the micro level, through the "cutting out procedure" (Smith 1978) and the dynamics of exclusion (Lemert 1962).

Omissive silences may not be recognized as such by actors themselves, but rather defined as problematic by their audiences. When a response is expected, even demanded, but turns out not to be forthcoming, the absence of sound assumes a paradoxically high volume. For example, “calling in” is a politically rallying act that urges members of a disadvantaged group to take a stand and speak out in support of each other. Failing to add one’s voice to such a loud chorus of a disadvantaged group may be seen as a neglectful, careless act of privileged complacency. This was illustrated in 2017, when the “Me Too” online movement urged women to step up and present themselves in solidarity with victims of sexual harassment. Those who declined to do so, presumably because the issue did not hold sufficient personal relevance to them, faced a stigmatizing backlash of public shaming from some activists who implied that they were not displaying sufficient vocal outrage (Scott 2019).

In other cases, the individual perceives their own omissive silence as problematic, but this self-reflexive insight only arrives years after the event. In her model of self-labelling, Thoits (1985) argued that even in the absence of enacted social condemnation, people can imagine their own behavior as deviant and feel ashamed of themselves. Rex told such a story of a potential romantic relationship that never came to be. His virtual self seemed blemished (Goffman 1963a) by its clumsy tongue-tied alter:

A few times we would spend the night together. Nothing happened - we just watched TV and had a chat. Sometimes we would sleep in the nude. I wish I had asked her about how she felt about a relationship. I was kicking myself after for not asking her... I think about how it would have turned out. I’m not sure why nothing happened. Maybe she was happy with the way things were... But I didn’t want to risk anything.

Rex blamed this non-emergence on his own act of omission, in failing to tell the woman how he felt. If only he had dared to ask, how different his life might be! But without any words to say, the moment passed and “nothing happened.” This was another tale of first order disappointment, based on anguished self-chastisement. However, Rex’s tale also demonstrates the interactively contingent and negotiated process of socially accomplishing nothing. Flirting is a dance, an exchange of symbolic gestures and a line of joint social action (Blumer 1969; Tavory 2009). The shyness of one partner to initiate by calling out a response (Mead 1934) places limiting constraints on what the other can say and how the conversation will unfold.

Invisible figures

Many participants wrote about non-present forms: ghostly, missing figures who seemed noticeably absent. This created negative symbolic objects in the form of *no-bodies*: self-presented images of people who weren’t there. Sometimes these were real, extant others who had once lived but then been lost, and sometimes they existed only in the realms of the imaginary and phantasy (Sartre [1940] 2010). Relationships leave residue, as Roseneil (2009) explains, and haunt our waking lives (Gordon 2008). Despite their physical, material absence, missing significant others loom large in biographical selfhood. Indeed, some of the no-bodies whom participants described were other versions of themselves, alter egos whose potential had never been realized.

People disappear from social life through acts of commission. Some-body specific who was manifest in presence subsequently loses their place on the horizon of perception

(Husserl [1913] 2012). These social acts may be performed by self or other: an individual either makes themselves invisible, not wishing to be seen, or declines to recognize another, rendering them non-present. In either case, the actor takes into account the perspective of others, imagining how they (do not) appear from this external view (Weber [1922] 1947; Mead 1934). Commissive disappearing acts performed by the self include suicide (and other ways of dying), hiding, camouflage, disguise, and planned withdrawal, while those performed by others include deliberate ignoring, blind oversight, and forcible removal.

One example of hiding came from Emma, who refused to have a visual presence via digital and social media. She accounted for this as an attempt to escape the prying eyes of others, whom she imagined were pursuing her in a game of hide and seek. Far from feeling shame or stigma, Emma's narrative expressed defiant pride in her ability not to be seen. This is a tale of second order disappointment, showing calm and resolute adherence to a self-aware position. Emma accepted that taking a principled stance marked her out as deviant, but felt satisfied that she was showing personal integrity:

I have never understood why anyone wants a mobile phone. Once you have one everyone expects to be able to contact you all day and all night. Nothing is that urgent. I also hate the idea of anyone thinking they have any "right" to know where I am or what I am doing: whether that is GCHQ or my partner. To me a mobile phone is a tool of surveillance, and only that, and I do not want to be surveilled.

(Emma, 70)

Other participants told of disappearing acts that had a more complex, meta-interactional dynamic. Some-bodies make themselves *conspicuously absent*, by intending the very event of their disappearance to be witnessed and acknowledged. In a performative display of non-

presence, they aim to be seen as not being there. This, again, is a dramaturgically relational act, carefully staged and directed at an audience perspective (Goffman 1959). It involves a splitting of the Meadian social self, whereby the actor manifestly presents a false version of themselves (the “Me”) while the true core part (“I”) retreats from view (cf. Mead 1934). In other words, they are at pains to emphasize that the figure the audience can see is not their real self; it is merely a stand-in double, an imitation “non-Me.”

This occurs in situations of boredom, when an actor is forced to be physically present in a scene from which they feel socially disengaged. Using the dramaturgical technique of role distance (Goffman 1961b), they signal to onlookers that they are more than just this virtual self, this demeaning situated character; their real self is safely hidden and remains lying elsewhere. For example, Penelope complained about colleagues who attended meetings with their laptops, making a show of getting on with other work. She experienced this as a gesture of aggressive facework (Goffman 1967) within a dominance encounter (Grills and Prus 2018):

Most of us find staff (and other) meetings less than thrilling and time can be wasted when we could all be doing other things but they are a necessary and important channel of communication and part of the job. Someone working on their laptop throughout and only surfacing if given a direct prompt by the Chair or if they have an immediate, personal interest in an agenda item seems to signal that the person is far busier and more important than the rest of us who can therefore afford to give our full attention to the mundane business in hand.

(Penelope)

By contrast, through acts of omission, no-bodies fail to materialize, or subtly non-appear. Rather than there being some-body who is not seen, there is not anybody who emerges from the shadows to assume a social presence. Omissive no-bodies never come into existence, but are imaginatively wondered about, haunting the conscious mind. Sometimes these are vague, unformed ideas about one's own possible selves who have been denied social visibility. Through a process of misrecognition (May 2016), audiences label, locate, and categorize actors through views they do not share, leading to a sense of being unseen for whom one really is. For example, one participant commented on how stigmatizing attitudes to mental illness inflicted on some sufferers a symbolic social death (Sudnow 1967):

A lot of people who experience insufficient mental health services feel invisible, silent, and dehumanized. Quite literally feel like nothing.

(JB)

More common in my data, however, were tales of other people who had omitted to appear. Participants wrote about significant others who had not been born, failed to show up or neglected to be sufficiently present and involved within their lives. Longed-for babies, unrequited loves, or under-involved parents featured in these accounts, as haunting figures representing the possibility of having had a different relational self (Smart 2007). Narrators imagined themselves in the role of mother, carer, lover, teacher, and so on, regretting that without the reciprocal alter, such an ego could not be born.

For example, Imogen reflected on her experience of childhood without siblings. She felt ashamed that this difference made her family appear deficient in comparison to what she saw as normal, "proper" families. Wistfully imagining the activities in which she and these absent others could have joined (playing board games together, sharing the burden of care),

Imogen felt her own self to be lonely, insufficient, incomplete. She defined her identity relationally, in terms of whom she saw as missing. Her comments here remind us of Goffman's (1963a:12) description of how stigma reduces the individual "*from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discolored one.*" This is another tale of first order disappointment, wherein the dispersed strands of selfhood remain untidily strewn:

When I was growing up as an only child it always seemed that our family was incomplete and different from other "proper" families. I always felt that someone was missing and would have loved an older brother...

Without siblings, children can feel isolated and lonely. At Christmas, it was disappointing to be given games "for 2 to 4 players."

It is often assumed that only children are spoiled but in my case the opposite was true. My parents had quite strict rules to avoid this and I had fewer toys than many of my friends.

Only children have a difficult time when their parents are ill and are without support from siblings to share the responsibility of physical and emotional care.

(Imogen, 67)

Empty spaces

The final theme to emerge from the data was emptiness. Here, participants told stories of not having, which left unfilled gaps and holes. This feeling concerned symbolic objects that people had lost, given up, had taken away or perceived to be missing. Cooley ([1902] 1992) suggested that selfhood is defined by what one considers to be “mine” or to belong to me. Turning over the mirror, we can infer that those objects that we understand to be “not mine” would be equally important: that non-possession also shapes identity. I know who I am by what I do not have, can never have, or will not have again.

Emptiness is a particularly interesting form of nothing. Although it concerns the absence of matter, it is defined by everything except that matter: the constitutive outside (Hall 1996) that surrounds an unfilled space and delineates its borders. Objects of emptiness are viewed obliquely, by these indirect containers: fossils, shells, boxes, and holes that hint at the suggestion of some missing matter. The absence of a filling substance that could and should be there evokes a poignant, melancholy awareness of death, destruction, endings, and the irrevocability of loss.

By acts of commission, a known quantity of substantive matter is lost, removed, or surrendered. The negative symbolic object this produces is not the missing some-thing per se, but rather the empty space it leaves behind, which carries traces of its form. Elsewhere (Scott 2019), I have identified five different types of emptiness, three of which are produced by acts of commission. The *vacuum* occurs when everything is sucked out of a space, leaving the total absence of matter. For example, stress and burnout involve a state of psychological exhaustion: all reserves are empty and we have nothing left to give. The *black hole* is the opposite, formed when everything is sucked in and violently destroyed; it is a terminal depth from which nothing can escape. This process of catastrophic implosion (Barrow 2000) represents experiences of grief, trauma, and emotional breakdown. Finally, the *nuclear hole* is a doughnut-like formation, produced by the removal of a core from its orbiting surround.

This occurs through the loss of something once held deep inside the heart: a precious, valued part of self or body that was central to identity.

An example of the nuclear hole came from my participant Willow, who wrote of her experience of recovery from anorexia nervosa. Giving up addiction is an act of role surrender, which is voluntarily commissive. However, the “ex-” identity to which it leads (Ebaugh 1988) means that the agent is never fully free; they carry with them “relic” or “hangover” remnants of their prior toxic substance (Gross and Stone 1964).

Willow’s story was presented in two parts, contrasting the fullness and busy-ness of the period of illness and treatment with the calm and uneventful emptiness of “ordinary” life. Anorexia was an intense and dramatic space to inhabit, packed with temporal density (cf. Southerton 2006). As Goffman (1961a) observed, the inpatient world of total institutions is characterized by hectic, regimented routines and uniform batch living. This strips the inmate of autonomy but also responsibility, which can provide a sense of safety, familiarity, and comfort. Leaving the hospital may then evoke release anxiety (Goffman 1961a) at the prospect of self-sufficiency.

Willow reflected on her time in the hospital almost with nostalgia: a bittersweet feeling of displacement from a situation to which one can never return (Davis 1979; May 2017). She felt an ambivalent mixture of shame and pride about her act of giving up, demonstrating second order disappointment. Living without anorexia meant adjusting to a loss of core identity, a state of *not-having* something that had once defined her self. Willow assumed negative responsibility for her loss, showing narrative transgression through the meanings she attributed to sacrifice and surrender. Reflecting on this process led her to a position of peaceful, resigned gratitude:

Despite all I have achieved and gained and all that I have in my life, recovery from anorexia still feels like living with a hole inside of me... a sense that something is missing... it also involves living with a significant sense of loss, and an awareness of no longer having the things that anorexia once provided. My eating disorder was a private, cotton-wool padded world of my own creation, where I felt strangely safe, secure, untouchable.

I am also sometimes reminded of inpatient life... the “progress” recorded in weight, daily blood pressure checks, BMI charts, rules, boredom, banned smoking breaks, hiding butter, timed meals, stashed laxatives, a failing heart, people making decisions about me, clothes getting tighter, pacing the corridors, meetings, blood tests, asking permission, hopelessness, the wheel chair, mirrors, friendships, being sectioned, weight gain, ECGs ... negotiations with a dietician, eating in silence... feeling stuffed, weight targets, tears... writing in my diary, staring at the clock, the local radio station playing in the dining room, liquid supplements, the hard hospital beds. That was once my world, and now it is so far removed that I find it hard to believe that was once me.

(Willow, 32)

Acts of omission produce two other types of empty form (Scott 2019). The *void* is a vast chasm of infinite depth, confronted by the archetypal hero on their journey into unknown territory (Campbell [1949] 2008). For example, upon moving to a new place, taking a new job or starting a new relationship, we may experience the terrifying angst and “vertigo of possibility” (Sartre 1943). Any-thing could happen, and any-body could emerge. The *liminal gap* is a space between two bounded regions: a period of suspense and waiting (cf. Turner

1967). In the liminal gap, we are no longer who we were before, but neither do we know yet whom we might become.

The latter idea may describe some women's experiences of involuntary childlessness caused by infertility. An unborn soul is longed for and desperately wanted, despite being of unknown identity, and its perpetual non-appearance holds the subject in constant suspense. Women who want to but have never become pregnant (as opposed to losing a pregnancy) face a complex dilemma of narrative selfhood (Letherby 2002, 2015). The question of whether the event will ever happen remains unresolved, and so they cannot close the chapter with a definitive, conclusive ending (Polkinghorne 1988). Instead, they may feel haunted by the prospect of children who may never appear, together with an image of their future selves in roles they may not have. These empty, ghostly figures assemble on the scene as abstract, unknown objects of yet deep potential significance. Pippa wrote a poem touching on this theme:

...a lad of about seven or eight trying to scale a drain
pipe, his peers egging him on and a sunny wee girl
in Aran cardigan dancing pigtails skipping around...
all these little ones
innocent souls and their futures mapped out for them
like spiders webs - they will fall into them one day

(Pippa)

NOTHING AS A TOOL OF SELF-TRANSGRESSION

This paper has made an argument for autobiographical narrative transgression through negative responsibility assumption. By this, I mean the self-reflexive act of reconsidering the various things that we have not done, had, or become in our lives and searching for their meanings. This deepens our understanding of ourselves as complex, paradoxical beings, whose identities are shaped not only by positive decisions towards action and becoming, but also negative disinclinations away from unbecoming forms. Integrating both sides of the self provides a more balanced picture, bringing us to a place of realistic “disappointment,” or ambivalence, about what lies behind the scenes (Craib 1994).

Reverse biographical identity work can be performed on unmade selves to understand their place within the life story. Examining one’s lived experiences as just one possible reality creates a new awareness of the self as being relative and pluralistic. Like Schrödinger’s Cat, we recognize that each alternate version of the person we became is equally plausible and theoretically coterminous. Turning over the mirror, we find negative, inverted versions of all our positively made choices and decisions. With our human capacity for reflexivity (Mead 1934), we can be “transceivers” (Goffman 1963b) of information, assuming the perspectives of subject and object simultaneously. With this dualistic consciousness, we can compare the real and the imaginary realms as unfolding in parallel. *I* didn’t do, have, or become this, but another “me” might have done. Narrative transgression involves juxtaposing these counterparts in dualistic contrast: done and undone selves, lived and unlived experiences, real and unreal objects.

This argument is contextualized within my broader theory of the sociology of nothing (Scott 2018, 2019). Parallel to the manifest world of subjective perception (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2013), I suggest there is another phenomenological realm comprised of negative symbolic social objects. These can be discerned by reverse-marking lived experience and unconcealing narrative truths. Like their positive Blumerian (1969) counterparts, negative

symbolic social objects are formed emergently through processes of interaction, where their meanings are negotiated. Yet these phantom forms — no-things, no-bodies, non-events, and lost experiences — have their own, latent agency that operates behind the scenes. Through the indirect effects of traces, ripples, shadows, and shells, we can infer the prior existence of a ghost in the machine. Someone had to make nothing happen, and that agent is (part of) me.

Negative responsibility assumption is a brave act of self-transgression, with which people may engage at different levels. As my research participants' accounts showed, a common way to narrate lost experience is to focus on its adverse effects, telling tales of sadness, regret, guilt, and shame that arise from greener paths not taken. Central themes within these stories are pain, neglect, and failure: a sense of lacking, missing, wanting things that could have made life better. Participants like Imogen, Margot, Rex, and Madeleine wrote about their feelings of disappointment at this first order level: questioning and doubting their choices kept them stuck in states of unresolved dissatisfaction and existential guilt.

However, sometimes it is possible to see no-things differently, as objects we acknowledge to be absent but have learned to live without. This might concern aspects of identity reluctantly surrendered, or lost opportunities with which we have made peace. It might also describe serendipity or fortunate escape: pitfalls narrowly avoided, bullets miraculously dodged. Participants like Emma, Rachel and Willow told such stories with a more uplifting tone, indexing emotions of pride, relief, and gratitude, or a sober, humble calm. Reflecting on the meanings to be found in non-experience, these narrators reached a position of second order disappointment: a recognition that, by making nothing happen, they had helped rebuild themselves.

Narratives of nothing, therefore, need not be sad and sorry tales. They may instead give rise to dignity, acceptance, and peaceful pain relief. Rather than burning with the stigma of a lost potential dream, we can practice self-compassion and gently treat our wounds.

Taking negative responsibility is a double-edged sword, on the one hand threatening confrontation with discomforting truths, but on the other, promising freedom from the ghosts haunting our pasts. Reconciling ourselves to what is foregone or impossible can create new meanings, providing reason, aim, and impetus for self-transformative change. Understanding the undone might therefore be a new “going concern” of personal and social ethics, which begins but does not end with quests for biographical integrity.

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